

this point ; we have refrained from pressing it. But it is a thing unknown in the history of government that during an important session like this, two of the most important ministers in the government, should be absent from the House during the whole session, without any good reason given. The hon. Minister of Public Works (Mr. Tarte), the head of one of the most important departments in the government, is also absent. A good reason for his absence would be if he were unable to do his work here, and had gone away for rest and medical treatment. But, is that the case? Everybody knows that it is not. What is he doing? He has taken a position which, if he is able to perform its duties will throw upon him more worry and responsibility than if he had remained here with his officers about him and had conducted the affairs of his department. It is most important in the public interest, that a minister, at the head of so great a department, should be in his place in the House, above all during a session like this, the last before an election campaign. There were other men who could have performed the duties of looking after the exposition in Paris much better than the Minister of Public Works could do. It cannot be because he is so much required there that he is absent from this House. What, then, is the reason? And, even, aside from these two ministers who are out of the country, we have been treated almost every day to the spectacle of almost empty ministerial benches. There never has been a session of parliament since I entered this House in 1882, when that abuse has been so completely the rule, instead of the exception, as it has been this session. Now, why is it that the minister is not here? The acting minister says the minister knows, and he thought he ought to be recommended for \$400 of an increase, but no good reason is given. I think we are entitled to an answer as to why the minister of one of the departments is not present to attend to his work.

The PRIME MINISTER (Sir Wilfrid Laurier). I do not know that this is the proper time to discuss the question that my hon. friend has raised, but since he has done so I have no objection to give him the information to which he thinks he is entitled, though it has been given before. I will commence what I have to say by answering his reference to the minister of Public Works. My hon. friend was here at the opening of the session, and has been ever since. He saw the Minister of Public Works in his seat at various times from the opening of the session up to the time he left for France, and I think if I were to put the question to my hon. friend what he thought of the health of the Minister of Public Works, he would answer that he thought he was in poor health. It is notorious that the Minister of Public Works went to France last summer, where he under-

went a serious operation ; it is notorious that in less than six weeks after he had undergone that operation he came back to Canada and resumed his official duties. That his health should be poor under the circumstances would not seem unlikely to anybody. Everybody would agree that Mr. Tarte would have consulted his own interest better if he had remained longer in France and continue to receive medical treatment. That he had a relapse, that the wound did not heal as rapidly as was expected, that his general health suffered, is not at all surprising ; on the contrary it was, in my estimation, the unavoidable consequence of what I thought at the time an imprudence on the part of the Minister of Public Works. He certainly was in very poor health at the time he left for France in March last. It is true that Mr. Tarte is very active in France, more active than I would like him to be. I think Mr. Tarte, with his usual impetuosity of character, does not consult his own interest. When he left Canada for France he did so under medical advice that a change of air and a change of work would benefit him if he followed the advice with circumspection. We all know that in many cases a change of air and a change of occupation is beneficial for a man who is subjected to a great mental strain. My hon. friend has come to the conclusion, perhaps, that Mr. Tarte's health is not very bad ; but he certainly knows the Minister of Public Works too well to be surprised that his activity and energy do not permit him strictly to follow the instructions of his medical adviser. So much for Mr. Tarte.

Now, I come to Mr. Sifton. Everybody knows that Mr. Sifton whose general health, I think, is fair, is afflicted with a chronic infirmity. Mr. Sifton spoke to me some time before the session, saying that he found to his alarm that this chronic infirmity was increasing, and he was advised that unless he consulted a specialist the consequences might be serious ; and it is not extraordinary that a man under such circumstances, a man in the prime of life, as he is, should desire at the earliest moment to seek the best treatment before it was too late, as in these matters prompt action is of the greatest importance. Of course under the circumstances, I had no hesitation at all as head of the government, in advising Mr. Sifton to seek further treatment. Accordingly he did so. After he reached Vienna his medical adviser had to go to Paris, and Mr. Sifton followed him to Paris in order to pursue a treatment which, as I understand from a letter I have received from him, has to be repeated every second day. Under these circumstances, I appeal to my hon. friend if he thinks he is justified in commenting so severely as he does upon the absence of the Minister of the Interior. For my part, I think that a man who is still under forty years of age, and finds this in-